

# ALCOHOL

Alcohol is a drug, just as cocaine and marijuana are. For children and adults alike, alcohol is the number one drug of choice. An individual who begins drinking as a young teen is four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than someone who waits until adulthood to use alcohol. Almost 14 million Americans abuse alcohol or have developed alcoholism. The personal costs include broken dreams, potentials never reached, conflict, emotional grief, injury, illness, and death. The message is clear. The consequences of alcohol misuse are serious.

Alcohol occurs naturally in the environment in several forms. Ethyl alcohol is the chemical found in alcoholic beverages. Some distilled beverages, such as gin and vodka, may be as much as 45 percent alcohol, but these beverages are usually diluted as part of a mixed drink. One drink is equal to 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits, five ounces of wine or 12 ounces of beer.

### ▼ Physical Effects

All alcohol is poison to some extent. Some forms can cause blindness if consumed in even small amounts. The ethyl alcohol in a beverage can be fatal if consumed in large amounts over a short period of time. But even in small amounts, such as those found in a can of beer, a glass of wine, or a shot of liquor (equal in their alcohol content), alcohol has a harmful effect.

Some of these effects include:

- Motor function and coordination are greatly impaired; resulting in driving accidents, falls, and other injuries;
- Brain function is harmed, leading to confusion, and memory loss;
- Damage can occur in the liver (cirrhosis of the liver is more common among alcohol abusers), pancreas, brain, stomach, and heart;
- Other ailments such as anemia, pancreatitis, gastritis (stomach ailments), and neuritis (nerve damage) can result from alcohol use;

Women who drink alcohol during pregnancy may give birth to babies with alcohol-related neurologic disorders, including fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). Children with FAS may have mental retardation, facial and limb irregularities, heart defects, behavior problems, shorter height, and lower birth weight. Children with fewer and more-subtle symptoms are said to have fetal alcohol effects.

Because alcohol is a depressant, when used in combination with other depressants, including prescription drugs such as sleeping pills or pain relievers, the effect can be fatal.

## ▼ Psychological Effects

Alcohol is a depressant, but its immediate effect on many users may make them more agitated or aggressive. One reason is that alcohol lowers an individual's inhibitions, freeing them to behave in ways they normally wouldn't, including ways that may be harmful, such as unprotected sex, violence, and drunk driving. Long-term abuse of alcohol can cause severe psychological problems, including extreme anxiety and alcohol dependency. Many long-term drinkers deny they have a problem. They also have great difficulty in setting long-term goals, are unable to handle responsibility, and proceed to accomplish necessary tasks. Continued abuse of alcohol may lead to alcohol dependence. All age groups - men, women, and young people can become alcoholics. Teens can become alcohol dependent in as few as six months.

## ▼ Additional Information

For additional information on inhalant abuse, visit the websites of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, NIDA ([www.drugabuse.org](http://www.drugabuse.org)); the National Clearinghouse on Alcohol and Drug Information, NCADI ([www.health.org](http://www.health.org)); the Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free ([www.alcoholfreechildren.org](http://www.alcoholfreechildren.org)); the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, NIAAA ([www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)); and Missouri's prevention website ([www.missouriprevention.org](http://www.missouriprevention.org)).



For more information,  
contact the  
Missouri Department of  
Mental Health,  
Division of  
Alcohol and Drug Abuse  
P.O. Box 687  
1706 East Elm  
Jefferson City, MO 65102  
573-751-4942  
or 1-800-364-9687  
[www.dmh.mo.gov](http://www.dmh.mo.gov)



Source: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Abuse, 2005.